

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

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RUFHGVAUSMISSION GENEVA 316
AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

C O N F I D E N T I A L DACCA 3096

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, SREF, BG, BM
SUBJ: MUSLIM REFUGEES FROM BURMA

REF: STATE 119776

SUMMARY: IN THE COURSE OF A TRIP TO CHITTAGONG I FOUND
WIDESPREAD CONCERN ABOUT THE REFUGEE SITUATION ON THE
BURMA BORDER AND WIDESPREAD SPECULATION BY BOTH OFFICIALS
AND PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS THAT A SOVIET CONSPIRACY WAS
SOMEHOW BEHIND THE MOVEMENT. FOREIGN SECRETARY TABARAK
HUSAIN, HOWEVER, DOES NOT SUBSCRIBE TO THIS CONSPIRACY
THESIS, BUT CLAIMS THAT THE REFUGEE MOVEMENT IS THE
DIRECT RESULT OF ACTIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT OF BURMA.
THE BDG HAS PROPOSED SENDING A MISSION TO BURMA AT SUCH A
TIME AS THE BURMESE HAVE TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED THE
ACTIVITIES CAUSING THE REFUGEE MOVEMENT AND AGREED
TO DISCUSS MEASURES TO TAKE BACK REFUGEES. I BELIEVE
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SPECULATION ABOUT A SOVIET ROLE CAN BE EXPLAINED BY A
NATURAL TENDENCY OF BANGLADESHIS TO SEE CONSPIRACY
BEHIND EVERY TROUBLE AND GENUINE CONCERNS CAUSED BY THE
COUP IN AFGHANISTAN AND SOVIET SUCCESSES IN AFRICA.
END SUMMARY.

1. DURING MY FIRST VISIT TO CHITTAGONG, MAY 12-14,

I FOUND GREAT CONCERN ABOUT THE REFUGEE PROBLEM ON THE BURMA BORDER, NOT FAR FROM THAT CITY. OFFICIALS WERE PREOCCUPIED WITH RELIEF EFFORTS; THE COMMISSIONER AND DEPUTY COMMISSIONER FIT IN APPOINTMENTS WITH ME DURING PERIODS THEY DID NOT HAVE TO BE AT THE CAMPS ON THE BORDER. THEIR ACCOUNTS UNDERLINED THE SEVERE CONDITION OF THE REFUGEES AND THE CONCERN FELT BY THE BDG. COMMISSIONER AWAL REPORTED ON MAY 14 THAT THERE WERE 110,000 REFUGEES (A SOMEWHAT LOWER FIGURE THAN THAT CLAIMED BY BDG OFFICIALS IN DACCA) IN CAMPS AND THAT THEY HAD BEEN COMING ACROSS THE BORDER AT THE RATE OF 6,000 PER DAY. HE REPORTED THAT THE MOST IMMEDIATE RELIEF REQUIREMENT WAS SHELTER, ALTHOUGH SANITATION AND DRINKING WATER WERE ALSO PRESSING PROBLEMS. HE APPEALED TO USG RELIEF ASSISTANCE (THE BDG IN DACCA HAS STILL MADE NO SUCH FORMAL REQUEST). AWAL SAID THAT INTERVIEWS WITH REFUGEES INDICATED THAT THE MOVEMENT HAD BEEN CAUSED WHEN BURMESE SOLDIERS HAD SURROUNDED VILLAGES INTO WHICH BURMESE OFFICIALS WENT TO EXAMINE REGISTRATION CARDS. AWAL CLAIMED THAT THE BURMESE HAD CARRIED AWAY YOUNG MEN, REPORTEDLY TO WORK IN OTHER BORDER AREAS, RAPED A NUMBER OF WOMEN, AND ATTACKED A NUMBER OF MEN (AWAL HAD CAREFULLY TAKEN DOWN THE NUMBER OF CASES IN EACH CAMP IN A NOTEBOOK), CAUSING THE MUSLIMS TO FLEE. HE REPORTED THAT SOME 60 PERCENT OF THE REFUGEES IN CAMPS POSSESSED REGISTRATION CERTIFICATES BUT THAT THESE HAD

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NOT BEEN RESPECTED BY THE BURMESE (AWAL'S DEPUTY COMMISSIONER SEPARATELY SAID THAT MANY BURMESE MUSLIMS WITH CERTIFICATES FLED BECAUSE THEIR CHILDREN HAD BECOME OF AGE SINCE THEIR PARENTS' REGISTRATION AND CONSEQUENTLY DID NOT HAVE VALID CERTIFICATES). AWAL SERIOUSLY AND AT SOME LENGTH PRESENTED A BYZANTINE ACCOUNT OF HOW THE SOVIET UNION WAS STIMULATING THE MIGRATION AS A PART OF THEIR SUPPORT FOR A MOVEMENT TO CREATE A UNION OF TRIBAL PEOPLE IN BURMA AND THAILAND BY EXPELLING NON-TRIBAL PEOPLE.

3. IN MY DISCUSSIONS WITH NON-GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS I FOUND THAT SOME HEAD HAD BEEN GENERATED BY THE REFUGEE PROBLEM. FOR EXAMPLE, BOTH THE VICE CHANCELLOR OF CHITTAGONG UNIVERSITY AND THE CHAIRMAN OF THE CHITTAGONG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE TOOK THE INITIATIVE TO SPEAK TO ME OF THEIR CONCERN ABOUT THE SITUATION. THEY WERE INTERESTED IN RELIEF -- THEY WERE COLLECTING FUNDS AND URGED THE U.S. TO ASSIST -- BUT THEY SPOKE WITH GREATER FERVOR ABOUT THE SOVIET CONSPIRACY WHICH THEY SAW AS BEHIND THE MIGRATION.

4. FOLLOWING MY RETURN FROM CHITTAGONG I HAD A CHANCE

FOR A BRIEF TALK WITH FOREIGN SECRETARY TABARAK HUSAIN. I ASKED HIM ABOUT THE STORY OF SOVIET COMPLICITY TOLD BY THE COMMISSIONER IN CHITTAGONG. HE FIRST SAID THAT THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF BURMA WAS ACTIVE IN THE AGITATION AGAINST MUSLIMS, BUT WHEN ONE OF HIS SUBORDINATES POINTED OUT THAT THAT PARTY WAS SYMPATHETIC TO PEKING, THE FOREIGN SECRETARY, REVERSING HIMSELF, SAID EMPHATICALLY THAT THE ARAKANESE MUSLIMS WERE BEING EJECTED AS A RESULT OF A CAMPAIGN BY THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT OF BURMA. I CONCLUDE, THEREFORE, THAT THE BDG, AT LEAST FOR THE PRESENT, DOES NOT SUBSCRIBE TO THE CONSPIRACY THESIS, ALTHOUGH THERE IS WIDESPREAD BELIEF IN IT IN DACCA AS WELL AS CHITTAGONG.

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5. IN MY DISCUSSION WITH THE FOREIGN SECRETARY I EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF BANGLADESH'S KEEPING IN COMMUNICATION WITH BURMA TO SEEK A RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM. HUSAIN ASSURED ME THAT HE WAS IN CLOSE TOUCH WITH THE BURMESE AMBASSADOR. THE BDG POSITION, WHICH THEY HAVE CONVEYED TO THE BURMESE, IS THAT THE FOREIGN SECRETARY WOULD WISH TO VISIT RANGOON AT SUCH A TIME AS THE BURMESE HAD AGREED TO A TEMPORARY HALT TO THE CAMPAIGN, WHICH IS CAUSING THE REFUGEES TO MOVE, AND THE BURMESE HAD AGREED TO DISCUSS MEASURES WHICH MIGHT BE TAKEN TO ENABLE REFUGEES TO RETURN. HUSAIN SAID HE HAD TOLD THE BURMESE AMBASSADOR THAT PERHAPS SOME BANGLADESHIS IN THE LAST YEAR OR SO MAY HAVE MIGRATED TO BURMA AND THEY COULD BE TAKEN BACK TO BANGLADESH, BUT THIS SHOULD BE DONE IN A REGULAR WAY BY DEPORTATION. THE OTHER REFUGEES (AND HERE HUSAIN OBVIOUSLY MEANT THE VAST NUMBER OF THOSE WHO HAD CROSSED THE BORDER) SHOULD BE PERMITTED TO RETURN TO BURMA. HUSAIN SAID HE HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT BANGLADESH, LIKE BURMA, WISHES THE BORDER TO BE PEACEFUL --"WE BOTH HAVE ENOUGH PROBLEMS ELSEWHERE" --AND BANGLADESH HAS NO INTEREST IN SEPARATISM ALONG THE BURMA BORDER. IN FACT, HUSAIN TOLD THE BURMESE, THE MOST LIKELY CAUSE OF SEPARATISM MIGHT BE AN UPROOTED AND DISCONTENTED POPULATION OF ARAKANESE MUSLIMS ACROSS THE BORDER IN BANGLADESH. SUCH A SITUATION ALSO MIGHT CAUSE OUTSIDE INTERVENTION (HUSAIN MENTIONED LIBYA AS AN EXAMPLE). HUSAIN SAID HE HAD TOLD THE BURMESE AMBASSADOR HE HAD IN MIND ACHIEVING CONDITIONS FAVORABLE TO TALKS IN RANGOON WITHIN A SHORT PERIOD RATHER THAN AFTER, FOR EXAMPLE, "THREE MONTHS".

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